

From: Casso, Ruben [/O=EXCHANGELABS/OU=EXCHANGE ADMINISTRATIVE GROUP (FYDIBOHF23SPDLT)/CN=RECIPIENTS/CN=E33DF0ABBBF049959E9100E556C7E634-CASSO, RUBEN]
Sent: 5/20/2020 4:33:18 PM
To: Davis, Alison [Davis.Alison@epa.gov]; Weinstock, Lewis [Weinstock.Lewis@epa.gov]; Rimer, Kelly [Rimer.Kelly@epa.gov]; Smith, Darcie [Smith.Darcie@epa.gov]
CC: Durant, Jennah [Durant.Jennah@epa.gov]; Robinson, Jeffrey [Robinson.Jeffrey@epa.gov]
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Ethylene oxide less hazardous than US EPA says, Texas concludes

State's determination helps chemical industry but could threaten communities' health

by Cheryl Hogue

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Texas says ethylene oxide is far less hazardous than the US Environmental Protection Agency determined in 2016.

The carcinogenic gas is a key building block for pharmaceuticals and plastics and is used to sterilize medical equipment. The chemical sector is a major emitter of this toxic pollutant.

On May 15, the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) set a risk screening level of 2.4 parts per billion ethylene oxide inhaled cumulatively over a lifetime. The agency will use the number in decisions regarding air pollution permits. In contrast, the EPA's 2016 assessment concluded there is a one-in-a-million chance of developing cancer from inhaling 0.1 parts per trillion of ethylene oxide over a lifetime.

The TCEQ's action will make it easier for chemical companies to get air pollution permits from the TCEQ for new facilities or plant expansions. It will also bolster the chemical industry's fight against stricter EPA regulation.

The Ethylene Oxide Panel of the American Chemistry Council, an industry group, says it backs the TCEQ's conclusion, adding that the Texas agency "set the record straight" on the EPA's "flawed" number.

Activists warn that the TCEQ's action could lead to greater health risks to communities that have disproportionately high levels of exposure to industrial emissions of ethylene oxide.

The EPA is under court order to publish by May 29 a regulation on the emissions of ethylene oxide and other hazardous air pollutants from manufacturers of miscellaneous organic chemicals. The White House is currently reviewing that rule.